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FT-Amends Focused Creative Writing

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Amends-Focused Creative Writing

CSUSB, Community-Based Art (CBA), PRISON ARTS COLLECTIVE (PAC)

Class: Arts Facilitator Training Course

Instructor: Professor Annie Buckley

Assignment: Sample Lesson Plan

Student: Mark Anthony Taylor

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Amends-Focused Creative Writing

LESSON PLAN

THEME: Applied Empathy

SUBJECT: Amends-Focused Creative Writing

LEARNING GOALS:

- Students will learn how to empathize by writing about their crime from the victim's point of view
- Students will learn the correct way to express remorse by writing a letter of apology to their victim(s)
- Students will learn the correct way to offer constructive criticism to their peers
- Students will learn how to create a *Meaningful Amends Plan (MAP)*.
- Students will learn how to create logotherapeutic rehabilitative plan for the future

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Pens
- Writing Paper
- Name Tags
- Post-Its
- Handouts
- 28 copies of Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*

SKILLS NEEDED: A genuine desire to want to make amends

SKILLS GAINED: An in-depth understanding of how crime impacts people and society as a whole

This *Amends-Focused Creative Writing* course was inspired by the California State University San Bernardino's Community-Based Art Prison Arts Collective. Authored by an incarcerated PAC student, this course encourages honest self-expression, enhances empathetic understanding, inspires introspection, and promotes rehabilitation and healing.

WEEK ONE

INTRODUCTIONS

- If possible, place the desks and the chairs in one big circle. This workshop will be non-hierarchical.
- Distribute needed materials:
 - Pens
 - Writing Paper
 - Name Tags
 - Post-Its
 - Handouts
 - 28 copies of Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*
- Introduce yourself and welcome the class

ICE BREAKER (Positive Pen Name)

1. Create a positive pen name—A pseudonym assumed by an author.
2. Write the positive pen name on your name tag.
3. Place the name tag on your shirt over your heart.
4. Write a negative characteristic that you would like to rid yourself of on a Post-It.
5. Tear up the Post-It and hold it in a closed fist.

TRANSITION TO BREATHING EXERCISE

Still holding the pieces of the torn up Post-It in a closed fist remain seated, close your eyes and ...

- inhale deeply for four seconds
- once your lungs are full pause for 4 seconds
- exhale for 4 seconds
- release one finger or a thumb

Repeat the breathing exercise four more times, at which point you will have released the torn up Post-It from your hand. Have the participants throw the Post-Its in the trash can, thereby ridding themselves of the negative attribute. Encourage the participants to let go of the negative attribute that they wrote on the Post-It and embrace the positive attribute that their pen name represents.

RELATED VOCABULARY

1. **Empathy:** Identification with and understanding of the thoughts and feelings of another
2. **Amends:** Reparation for insult, injury, or loss <make *amends*>
3. **Creative Writing:** Inventive or imaginative literary compositions

REFLECTION 1.1 What is the difference between sympathy and empathy? Sympathy is feeling sorry “for” someone while empathy is feeling sorry “with” someone. Empathy is standing in another person’s shoes and caring what it feels like to be there.

During today’s session we will use our imaginations to step into the shoes of someone we have injured or offended. We will use the narrative craft throughout this workshop as a form of empathetic self-expression. All compositions, which must be original, will be submitted for peer critique. Before we begin we have to establish our *ground rules* and our *class values*.

GROUND RULES

1. Show up.
2. Be fully present and engaged in the process.
3. No negativity.

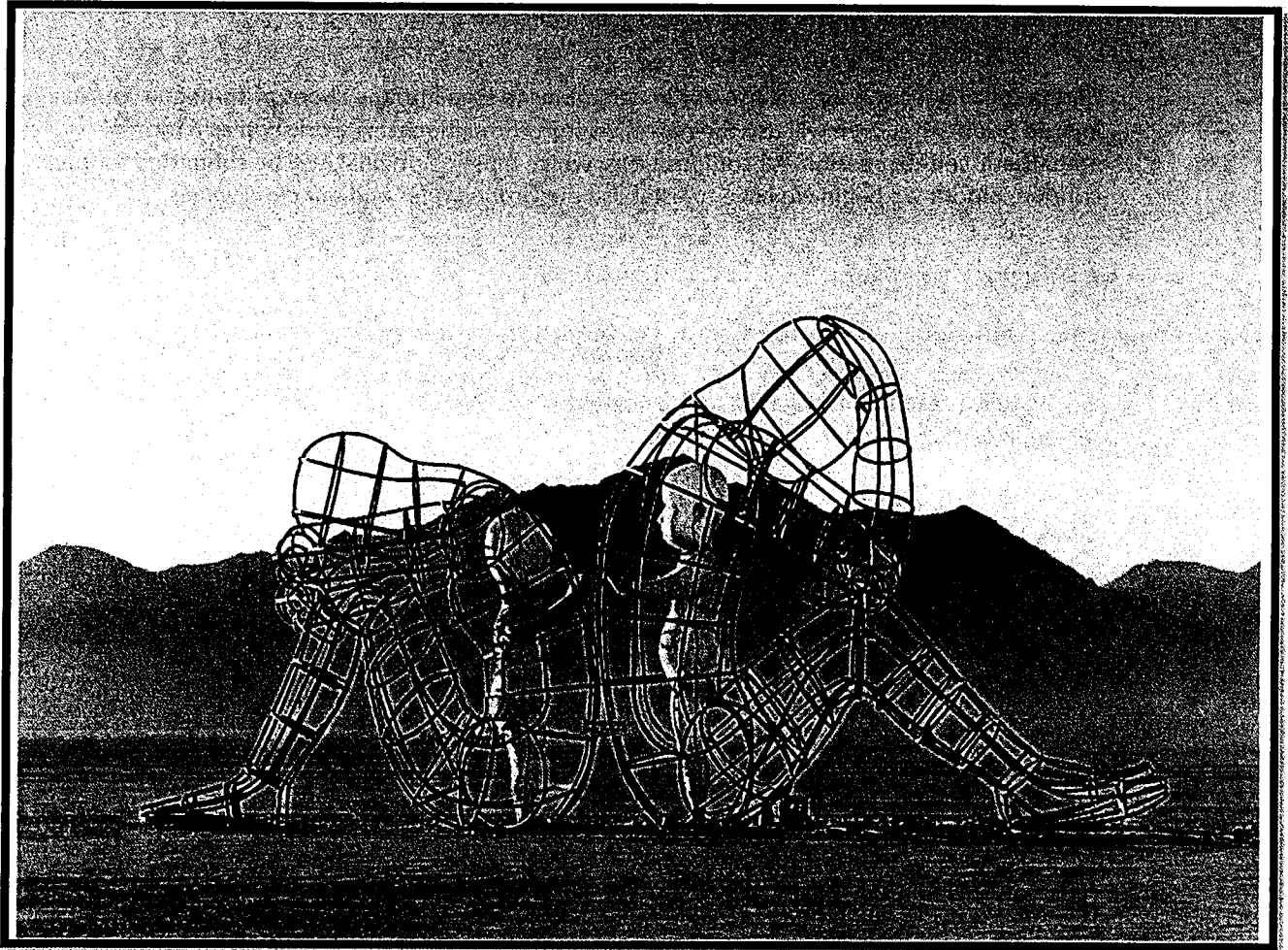
CLASS VALUES

The class will develop, agree on, and fill in three core class values. Examples: excellence, self-discipline, self-improvement.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The expectations for this class are high but achievable. We will work as a collective to achieve the desired result. Remember, “*Teamwork makes the dream work*”—the dream being the healing of our communities and the healing of ourselves.

REFLECTION 1.2 What do you think the artist who created the piece was trying to say?



ANSWER: One of the most powerful art pieces from Burning Man: A sculpture of two adults after a disagreement, sitting with their backs to each other. Yet, the inner child in both of them simply wants to connect. Age has many beautiful gifts but one we can live without is the pride and resentment we hold onto when we have conflicts with others. The forgiving, free spirit of children is our true nature. **Remember that when you feel stubborn.**

LITERARY (ART) HISTORY

When fully embraced and exercised, creative writing can be an incredibly powerful art form. Examine the following excerpts from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* to illustrate the point. Explain the time period (WW II) before proceeding in order to give Frankl's work context.

Excerpts from *Man's Search for Meaning*

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

The crowning experience of all, for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear any more—except his God.

Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment in finds meaning.

REFLECTION 1.3 What do the proceeding quotes mean?

A beautifully written memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning* is the chilling yet inspirational story of Viktor Frankl's struggle to hold on to hope during his three years as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. Now we are not in a concentration camp, but we are in state prison, and holding on to hope can be tough at times. Nevertheless, coming to terms with our past transgressions and atoning for our wrongs gives us hope that we can find meaning in our lives, just as Viktor Frankl did. In essence, that is what this class is about—hope and healing.

HOMEWORK

Read *Man's Search for Meaning* over the next three weeks. During the fourth week of this creative writing workshop we will use our understanding of Frankl's masterwork to create clearly outlined visions for our futures. Consequently, it is absolutely imperative that you read the assigned book.

REFLECTION 1.4 What effect does violent crime have on our society?

REFLECTION 1.5 Do those of us who have committed a violent crime have a moral responsibility to make amends?

REFLECTION 1.6 Have you ever tried to view your crime through the victim's eyes?

At this point the facilitator will read his own victim's perspective letter in order to give an example of the first assignment. **IMPORTANT:** The facilitator's example should respect the victims, never glamorizing or glorifying crime, nor should it minimize the pain and suffering caused by the offense.

Example Victim's Perspective Letter

The following is a real victim's perspective letter authored by the individual who wrote this course. The names of the victims have been redacted out of respect.

Even though I have been surrounded by violence my whole life, I have never really grown accustomed to it. At the end of the day I am no different than any other man. I would like to live a long life. But in my community premature death is as prevalent as it is senseless, waiting to snatch the life out of you at any moment, as it did with my close friend last night.

My friend [REDACTED] lost his life over a trivial argument. I went from enjoying a New Year's Eve party to watching my friend being stabbed to death. It happened so quick that I was left standing there in a state of disbelief. Another friend dead, murdered right in front of me as if his life was meaningless. To those of us who knew him, his life was priceless.

When the police arrived I pointed out the person who was responsible for [REDACTED]'s death. He went to jail, [REDACTED] went to the morgue, and I went home. When I got there I hugged my pregnant girlfriend and two year old daughter a little bit tighter. Still numb from what I had just witnessed, I was glad to be alive. That could have been me laying there in the street. I tossed and turned all night contemplating the fragility of life.

When I finally got out of bed the next morning I called my friend Mark to inform him of the tragedy. News of this nature was not new to our circle. Several of our friends have been murdered. Nevertheless, the news was no less palatable. After hanging up, I chilled with my family for a while.

At around 6:20 pm I decided to go to the store. As soon as I exited the apartment complex I saw a couple of my friends walking towards me. I started to walk towards them at which point Mark pulled out a gun, thinking of retaliation no doubt. He must have misunderstood me when I told him that the person who murdered our friend had been arrested and carted off to jail. That being the case there was no one left to retaliate against.

When he pointed the gun at me I was confused. We are the best of friends. When he shot me I was shocked. The first bullet hit me in the hand. Terrified, my survival instinct kicked in. I turned and ran. The second bullet hit me in the back like a sledgehammer, knocking the life and the wind out of me. The pain was excruciating, like nothing I have ever felt before. Consumed by intense, overpowering fear, I realized I was about to die.

My entire life flashed before my eyes. I saw the faces of everyone that I loved. I fell to the ground, struggling to breath, wondering why my best friend had just shot me. In that moment all that I wanted to do was live. I could feel my life slipping away as I took my last breath. At the age of 22 everything faded to black, forever.

Even though it is impossible to fully atone for murder, the person responsible for the aforementioned murder wrote apology letters to the deceased and his family members in order to gain insight into the gravity of the crime and, if possible, to offer the family some semblance of closure. The letter to the deceased is on pages 11 and 12.

ASSIGNMENT ONE

CREATIVE WRITING (ART MAKING)

Think about someone that you have hurt or offended. Place yourself in that person's shoes. Write about the incident from that person's point of view.

The first draft will be a rough draft. The victim's perspective letter will be rewritten after the student receives constructive criticism from the rest of the class.

Note to Facilitator

While the students are working on their assignment, walk around and ask questions in order to ensure that they understand the process and expectations. Support their efforts and encourage them to dig deep. Ensure that they are integrating concepts that were presented in class into their literary creations. Students will be given 45 minutes to create a rough draft of a victim's perspective letter.

REFLECTION

Students will stop working around 15 minutes before the session ends. At that point students will be given the opportunity to read their literary creation to the class. Their peers will offer feedback. Their pieces will be revised before the next session. Possible questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How difficult was it to put yourself in the victim's shoes?
- What emotions did you experience while creating the piece?
- Did you learn anything valuable during the process?
- Do you think about your crime differently now?

WEEK TWO

DIRECT AMENDS—HOW TO WRITE AN APOLOGY LETTER

The dictionary defines remorse as deep moral anguish and regret for past misdeeds. This definition, although accurate, is somewhat superficial. It would be more accurate to say that when you genuinely feel remorse you feel deep sorrow for something that you have done, you have empathy for those that you have injured, you seek to make amends for the injuries that you have caused, and you take steps to ensure that you will never repeat the offense. True remorse is one of the purest forms of empathy. With empathy you put yourself in the victim's shoes and try to see the offense from his/her perspective.

AMENDS

Making amends is an integral part of personal growth and healing. Only make amends when you truly understand the situation and when you feel a sincere call for atonement. It is imperative that you seek to make amends with people you have wronged if you want to begin the healing process. From the cradle to the grave, we will make errors in judgment and struggle to find a way to make peace with those we have harmed. When it comes to crime, making amends can be difficult, and even impossible in some situations. Nevertheless, we should still strive to make amends. The three different kinds of amends are listed below.

1. **Direct amends** deal with taking responsibility for your actions. In order to make direct amends you have to openly acknowledge why you did what you did and clearly articulate how you will fix the damage caused, if possible. An example would be paying restitution to your victim.
2. **Indirect amends** are ways to repair damage that cannot be physically undone. If you have committed a crime in the past or are in a situation where you cannot address the people whom you have offended, there are ways to make indirect amends. If you physically assaulted someone or committed theft, a way to indirectly make amends would be to volunteer in a shelter or take part in a program that will directly benefit others in need of assistance. Sometimes, people who were involved in a drunk driving accident may take steps to become an organ donor. These are all selfless examples of how making amends can help heal a situation.
3. **Living amends** is a positive way to display to others that you have evolved from the person that you used to be. Living amends is when you make genuine lifestyle changes in order to ensure that you don't reoffend.

REFLECTION 2.1 Why is it important to try to make amends when you have injured or offended someone?

APOLOGY LETTER CONTENT

In today's session we will be focused on direct amends in the form of apology letters. Drafting a meaningful apology letter requires deep introspection, humility, honesty, and a desire to make amends. While apologizing in person often conveys more sincerity, there are times when a formal, written apology might be your only option, as is the case for most of us who are incarcerated. When writing an apology letter, you need to address your error, acknowledge the other parties injuries, and accept full responsibility for your actions. If you want to make sure that your apology is effective and doesn't cause even more hurt, aim for both clarity and sincerity while you write.

1. Clearly state your intent to apologize at the beginning of the letter. This will give the recipient of the letter the opportunity to emotionally prepare to read it.
2. After acknowledging that you're apologizing, clearly state what you are apologizing for and why it was incorrect. Be very exact and descriptive. By fully putting it out there in the open the person that you're apologizing to will know that you understand the gravity of the offense.
3. Accept responsibility for your actions and acknowledge how much you have hurt them. Accepting responsibility, which can be difficult, is one of the most important parts of an apology. Push past the shame you may be feeling and take full responsibility for your actions. Example: "I take full responsibility for my actions and the pain that you have suffered as a result." Let them know that you understand how deeply they have been hurt. Be empathetic and sincere when you acknowledge their pain.
4. When you apologize, you need to be sincere and genuine about it. If you can't be, it might be better to wait until you really are sorry before apologizing. Insincere apologies ring hollow and add insult to injury. Sincerity is a key component of genuine apologies.
5. If you want to apologize correctly, you have to be careful about the language that you use. Bury your pride and strike a humble tone.

REFLECTION 2.2 Why is it inappropriate to ask for forgiveness when you have wronged someone?

6. You shouldn't ask for forgiveness. This places demands, whether you intend to or not, on the person who you have wronged. To ask for forgiveness is self-centered.
7. End your letter gracefully. If you don't know how else to end your letter, default to the basic "Sincerely ...". However, you can also get a little more creative and end your letter with a phrase like, "Again, I am profoundly sorry for hurting you."
8. Just saying I am sorry is not enough. We have to change so we don't continue to hurt people.

Remember that an apology doesn't magically fix everything. We have to atone for our past transgressions and give people the time and space that they need to heal.

ASSIGNMENT TWO

CREATIVE WRITING (APOLOGY LETTERS)

The students will write apology letters to people that they have injured or offended.

The first draft will be a rough draft. The letters will be rewritten after the student receives constructive criticism from the rest of the class.

Note to Facilitator

While the students are working on their assignment, walk around and ask questions in order to ensure that they understand the process and expectations. Support their efforts and encourage them to dig deep. Ensure that they are integrating concepts that were presented in class into their literary creations. Students will be given 45 minutes to write apology letters.

REFLECTION

Students will stop working around 15 minutes before the session ends. At that point students will be given the opportunity to read their literary creations to the class. Their peers will offer feedback. Their pieces will be revised before the next session. Possible questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How difficult was it to write an apology letter?
- What emotions did you experience while writing the apology letter?
- Did you learn anything valuable during the process?

WEEK THREE

INDIRECT AMENDS—CREATING A *MEANINGFUL AMENDS PLAN (MAP)*

Since we have completed victim's perspective letters and apology letters, now we can write a *Meaningful Amends Plan (MAP)*. We have started the direct amends process with the drafting of fully formed apology letters. Now we will focus our energies on indirect amends and living amends.

When I was young I was an emotionally inept, alcoholic, drug addicted gang member. I failed to identify and correct these issues and tragically they played a significant role in the commission of my crime. Unfortunately, a significant number of youth in inner city communities struggle with the same kinds of issues. Consequently, my MAP will focus on helping individuals who suffer from the same kind of issues I struggled with in the past.

EXAMPLE MAP

ISSUE: Emotional Ineptitude

AMENDS: I authored an emotional intelligence curriculum that is being taught in the *Lifer's Activity Group's (LAG)* and *I-FOR-SIGHT's* Inmate Leisure Time Activity Groups (ILTAGs). Additionally, I will teach this creative writing class and I will create another youth-centered creative writing class for youth offenders.

ISSUE: Substance Abuse

AMENDS: I earned *Alcohol/Drug Studies Specialist I & II Certifications* and a *Certificate of Achievement* in the same field. Once I am released I will earn a drug counselor certification and use it to help those who are suffering from addiction. In the meantime I will counsel youth offenders on the detriments of alcohol and drugs.

ISSUE: Gangs

AMENDS: I currently serve as the chairman of *Criminals and Gangmembers Anonymous (CGA)*. In my role as a mentor, I counsel youth on the detriments of gang activity. Once I am released I will share my story with youth offenders in juvenile halls and prisons in an attempt to turn them away from the criminal lifestyle.

REFLECTION 3.1 Why are MAPs important?

ASSIGNMENT THREE

Create a detailed MAP. The first draft will be a rough draft. The MAP will be rewritten after the student receives constructive criticism from the rest of the class.

Note to Facilitator

While the students are working on their assignment, walk around and ask questions in order to ensure that they understand the process and expectations. Support their efforts and encourage them to dig deep. Ensure that they are integrating concepts that were presented in class into their literary creations. Students will be given 45 minutes to write create a MAP.

REFLECTION

Students will stop working around 15 minutes before the session ends. At that point students will be given the opportunity to read their literary creations to the class. Their peers will offer feedback. Their pieces will be revised before the next session. Possible questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How difficult was it to create a MAP?
- What emotions did you experience while creating the MAP?
- Did you learn anything valuable during the process?

WEEK FOUR

LIVING AMENDS—LOGOTHERAPEUTIC REHABILITATION

Dr. Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which you should have read by now, Dr. Frankl explained how some prisoner's rose above their stressful suffering to create a positive inner experience and, by doing so, they were able to endure the harshest conditions imaginable.

In one example, Frankl talked about a particularly bleak day. With terrible sores on his feet, he was forced to walk many miles in the bitter cold to a work site, and once there, weakened from starvation, he "forced" his thoughts to another subject. He imagined himself "standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room." Before him sat an audience enthralled to hear him lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp. "By this method," Frankl says, "I rose above the suffering of the moment."

From his experiences and observations, Frankl concluded that everything can be taken from us but one thing, "The last of the human freedoms—the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

If Viktor Frankl could overcome the stress of his lengthy and inhuman imprisonment in a concentration camp, surely we can find the strength to overcome the stresses of our current circumstance. We can rise above the existential challenges that we face, no matter how difficult.

"Where" we are does not define "who" we are. Each of us is worth more than the worst thing that we have ever done. Let's use creative writing to heal the psychic harm and injuries caused by aggression and violence. Once we begin the healing process we can break the cycle of victimization and victimhood. If we can eradicate the debilitating patterns that landed us in prison new horizons will inevitably emerge.

REFLECTION 4.1 Is it possible to rise above your circumstances by envisioning a brighter future, as Viktor Frankl did?

ASSIGNMENT FOUR

Write a detailed vision for your future that clearly outlines what you hope to accomplish once you are released from prison.

The first draft will be a rough draft. The vision will be rewritten after the student receives constructive criticism from the rest of the class.

Note to Facilitator

While the students are working on their assignment, walk around and ask questions in order to ensure that they understand the process and expectations. Support their efforts and encourage them to dig deep. Ensure that they are integrating concepts that were presented in class into their literary creations. Students will be given 45 minutes to write an apology letter.

REFLECTION

Students will stop working around 15 minutes before the session ends. At that point students will be given the opportunity to read their literary creation to the class. Their peers will offer feedback. Their pieces will be revised before the next session. Possible questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How difficult was it to write a detailed plan for your future?
- What emotions did you experience while writing?
- Did you learn anything valuable during the process?

Thank you for coming on this journey of personal transformation with us. May creative writing help you find hope, healing, and peace.